

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 1169

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, LE
SUBJ: CRACKS IN THE LEBANESE FRONT

1. SUMMARY. THE EVENTS OF THE PAST MONTH HAVE AGAIN REVEALED THE SHARP ANIMOSITIES AND STRONG COMPETITION BETWEEN THE PHALANGE PARTY AND THE CHAMOUNIST NATIONAL LIBERAL PARTY FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN LEBANON. THE RECENT FORMATION OF A NEW MARONITE BLOCK IN THE LEBANESE PARLIAMENT INDICATES THAT SOME CHRISTIAN POLITICIANS, POSSIBLY LED BY FORMER PRESIDENT SULEIMAN FRANGIEH, MAY BE SEEKING TO FORM A "THIRD FORCE". END SUMMARY.

2. THE RECENT FIGHTING BETWEEN CHRISTIAN MILITIAS AND SYRIAN SOLDIERS IN EAST BEIRUT, WHICH WAS SPARKED BY THE FAYYADIYAH INCIDENT ON FEB 7, REVEALED THE DEEP DIVISIONS WITHIN THE LEBANESE FRONT AND HAS SERVED TO EXACERBATE THESE PROBLEMS. WHEN THE INCIDENTS FIRST BROKE OUT IN EAST BEIRUT ITSELF ON FEB 8, SEVERAL SOURCES REPORTED THAT MEMBERS OF THE CHAMOUNIST

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NLP WERE PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR ATTACKING THE SYRIANS AND THAT PIERRE GEMAYEL, THE LEADER OF THE PHALANGE PARTY, HAD SUCCEEDED IN KEEPING HIS MILITIA OFF THE STREETS. IN FACT, SOME NLP SUPPORTERS COMPLAINED TO US ON FEB 8 THAT THE PHALANGISTS WERE HIDING, LEAVING THE NLP TO FACE THE SYRIANS ALONE. AT LEAST ONE LOCAL SYRIAN COMMANDER THOUGHT THAT ELEMENTS OF THE NLP WERE SNIPING AGAINST SYRIAN SOLDIERS AND THEREFORE ORDERED

AN ATTACK ON NLP HEADQUARTERS ON FEB 7, DESPITE CHAMOUN'S CLAIM THAT HE WAS DOING EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO CALM THE SITUATION. (ASSEM QANSUH OF SYRIAN BAATH SAYS FIRING AT NLP HEADQUARTERS WAS REACTION OF LOCAL COMMANDER IN ASHRAFIYAH TO SHOOTING OF SYRIAN CHRISTIAN OFFICER (HANNAH LNU) SENT AS EMISSARY TO CHAMOUNISTS.)

3. WHEN DANY CHAMOUN, THE LEADER OF THE NLP MILITIAS, RETURNED TO BEIRUT ON FEB 9, THE PICTURE BEGAN TO CHANGE. ALTHOUGH DANY DID NOT SUCCEED (OR DID NO WANT) TO GET HIS "TIGER" MILITIA OFF THE STREETS OF EAST BEIRUT, HE DID APPARENTLY SUCCEED IN EXERCISING MORE CONTROL OVER THEM. AT THE SAME TIME, PIERRE GEMAYEL'S SONS, AMINE AND BACHIR, REPORTEDLY BEGAN TO TAKE A MORE ACTIVE ANTI-SYRIAN ROLE. DANY CHAMOUN CERTAINLY BELIEVES THAT IT WAS PHALANGE COMMANDO GROUPS, DIRECTED BY BACHIR AND AMINE GEMAYEL, WHO SYSTEMATICALLY PROVOKED THE SYRIANS WITH SNIPER FIRE UP TO AND INCLUDING FEB 14, THE DAY OF THE FURN AS-SHUBBAK INCIDENT, WHEN TWO SYRIAN SOLDIERS WERE MURDERED IN EAST BEIRUT, PROBABLY BY PHALANGIST MILITIA. DANY CHAMOUN ALSO CLAIMS THAT, WHEREAS HE AND HIS FATHER HAVE ATTEMPTED TO PLAY A HELPFUL ROLE BY TURNING OVER THREE NLP MEMBERS WHO WERE INDICTED AS MATERIAL WITNESSES IN THE FURN AS-SHUBBAK INCIDENT, THE GEMAYELS ARE PROTECTING THE REAL ASSASSINS. INFORMATION FROM OTHER SOURCES, AS WELL AS THE AMBASSADOR'S CONVERSATION WITH PIERRE GEMAYEL ON FEB 25, SUGGESTS THAT THIS MAY BE CORRECT.

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4. DURING THE WEEK OF FEB 20, AN INCIDENT IN BROUMMANA FURTHER EXACERBATED TENSIONS BETWEEN THESE TWO LEADING CHRISTIAN PARTIES. EARLY IN THE WEEK, A PHALANGE MILITANT WAS MURDERED IN THE STREETS OF ROUMIEH, NEAR BROUMMANA. SOME SOURCES SAY THIS WAS THE RESULT OF A PERSONAL VENDETTA OR FAMILY FEUD BUT THE PHALANGE WERE CONVINCED THAT THE NLP WAS RESPONSIBLE. ACCORDING TO SEVERAL SOURCES, A LOCAL PHALANGE GROUP SURROUNDED THE PRINTANIA HOTEL IN BROUMMANA, WHICH IS OWNED BY THE FATHER OF A LEADING NLP SUPPORTER, SHOT UP THE FACADE AND SET OFF SEVERAL EXPLOSIVE CHARGES. ALTHOUGH NO ONE WAS INJURED, THE DAMAGE HAS BEEN ESTIMATED AT SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND LEBANESE POUNDS. DANY CHAMOUN TOLD POLOFF FEB 23 THAT AMINE GEMAYEL HAD PAID HIM AN UNUSUAL AND FRIENDLY VISIT THE PREVIOUS EVENING. DANY WONDERED WHAT AMINE MIGHT BE UP TO; HE IS NOW CONVINCED, AS ARE SEVERAL OTHERS, THAT AMINE ORDERED THE PRINTANIA HOTEL ATTACK AND THAT HIS VISIT TO DANY WAS A DIVERSIONARY TACTIC. THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN OTHER INCIDENTS RECENTLY INVOLVING PNL AND PHALANGISTS; AN AIDE TO DANY CHAMOUN TOLD EMBASSY ON FEB 27, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT PHALANGISTS HAD ATTACKED NLP OFFICE THE NIGHT OF FEB 25 AND WOUNDED TWO NLP MILITIA.

5. THE PHALANGE HAVE OF COURSE DENIED RESPONSIBILITY FOR THESE

INCIDENTS AND HAVE REFUSED TO ASSIST THE AUTHORITIES IN APPREHENDING THEIR SUPPORTERS, WHO ARE ACCUSED OF BEING INVOLVED IN ANTI-SYRIAN INCIDENTS. IN AN INTERVIEW REPORTED IN THE PRESS ON FEB 26, AMINE SAID THERE WAS A FIFTH COLUMN OPERATING IN LEBANON TRYING TO DRIVE A WEDGE BETWEEN THE PHALANGE AND THE NLP. AMINE DESCRIBED THE PRINTANIA HOTEL INCIDENT AS SERIOUS AND CLAIMED THAT "WHEN ONE OF THE BOYS (OF THE PHALANGE) WAS KILLED IN ROUMIEH, WE DID THE IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTAIN THE REPERCUSSIONS WHICH USUALLY FOLLOW SUCH INCIDENTS." THE CHAMOUNISTS DO NOT BELIEVE HIM.

6. WHATEVER DIFFERENCES THERE MAY BE AT THE OPERATIONAL OR STREET LEVEL, THE TWO TOP LEADERS, CAMILLE CHAMOUN AND PIERRE GEMAYEL, ARE CONTINUING TO COOPERATE. THEY HAVE MET TOGETHER
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FREQUENTLY DURING THE LAST MONTH TO DISCUSS THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE SYRIAN PRESENCE, POLITICAL RECONCILIATION, AND OTHER MATTERS. THEIR VIEWS ON THESE QUESTIONS ARE CERTAINLY NOT IDENTICAL BUT THEY HAVE SO FAR REFRAINED FROM CRITICIZING EACH OTHER IN PUBLIC.

7. PERHAPS IN PART BECAUSE OF THE RENEWED FEUDING BETWEEN THE PHALANGE AND THE NLP, THIRTEEN MARONITE DEPUTIES IN THE LEBANESE PARLIAMENT HAVE FORMED A NEW GROUP CALLED "THE COALITION OF MARONITE DEPUTIES." THEY ARE REPORTED TO BE WORKING CLOSELY WITH THE MARONITE PATRIARCH. MEMBERS OF THE NEW COALITION DENY BOTH PRIVATELY AND PUBLICLY, HOWEVER, THAT THEY HAVE SET THEMSELVES UP AS RIVALS TO THE LEBANESE FRONT.

8. COMMENT: PHALANGE-NLP BICKERING AND INFIGHTING IS NOTHING NEW; FEUDS BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THESE TWO PARTIES WENT ON EVEN DURING THE DARKEST DAYS OF THE LEBANESE WAR. NEVERTHELESS, THEIR FAILURE TO COOPERATE AGAINST THE SYRIANS AND THEIR DEEP SUSPICIONS OF ONE ANOTHER, AS DEMONSTRATED BY THE INCIDENTS OF THEPAST MONTH, SUGGEST THAT THE LEBANESE FRONT IS NOT NEARLY AS SOLID AS IT HAS APPEARED.

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